

Truth of Kennedy's death may never be known

Public assumes Oswald was part of conspiracy, but proof is uncertain

BY PHILIP SHENON

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WASHINGTON — A quarter-century after gunshots echoed across Dealey Plaza in Dallas and left the president mortally wounded, investigators, scientists and the public seem no closer to a consensus about the circumstances of John F. Kennedy's assassination.

For many students of the events of Nov. 22, 1963, all that really seems clear is their ignorance. They know they may never understand exactly what happened

that day, or why.

They may never have conclusive evidence that Kennedy was the victim of a single, unstable gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, or the target of a conspiracy that, depending on the theorist, may have involved the Mafia, the governments of Cuba and the Soviet Union, radical right-wing groups or perhaps even elements of the American intelligence community.

"It does not seem likely that these mysteries will ever be solved," said Rep. Louis Stokes, an Ohio Democrat who a decade ago led a House inquiry into the

assassination. "I think it's more likely than not that we'll never know."

As a group, federal investigators have yet to settle on a single theory. The Warren Commission, a presidential panel led by Chief Justice Earl Warren that included some of the nation's most prominent lawyers and public servants, concluded in 1964 there was no evidence to prove a conspiracy.

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Fifteen years later, the congressional panel headed by Stokes contradicted the commission, finding Oswald had probably not acted alone and that the conspiracy might have included organized crime figures.

And the Justice Department said last year it had closed its own inquiry into the assassination by siding with the Warren panel. The department found "no persuasive evidence" to support arguments for a conspiracy.

The public at first seemed receptive to the conclusions of the Warren Commission, and many still accept them.

But almost immediately after its release, the commission's report came under attack by critics, some of them reputable scientists and criminal investigators who said the panel had been seriously misled or had overlooked compelling evidence of a broad conspiracy.

Perhaps most vexing, the critics said, were the questions about Oswald that had been left unanswered by the Warren Commission, particularly those involving his connec-

tions to the Mafia and to Cuba.

Oswald was a 24-year-old former Marine who had traveled to the Soviet Union in 1959 and did not return home for more than two years. He was a fervent supporter of Cuba's Fidel Castro, who, it was later learned, had been made a target for assassination by the CIA. Shortly before the Kennedy shooting, he had visited Mexico in an effort to secure a visa from the Cuban Embassy for travel to Cuba.

No sign of Castro

One thing the public as a whole has come to believe about him is he did not act alone: For the last two decades, opinion polls have found rejection of the Warren Commission's findings. According to a recent *New York Times*-CBS News Poll, 66% of Americans believe there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy.

The public's belief that he had accomplices was bolstered in 1979 by Stokes's panel, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which concluded after a two-year inquiry that Kennedy was "probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy." The finding was based largely on the results of an acoustical examination of the assassination site that indicated a second gunman.

But the panel found no strong evidence to link Castro to the shooting.

The committee also ruled out involvement by the Soviet Union and other foreign governments.

And it discounted rumors the FBI might have been involved.

The panel instead suggested the culprits might have — but had not necessarily — included organized crime figures like Carlos Marcello, boss of the New Orleans mob, and James R. Hoffa, who was president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, had associated with Mafia leaders and was a particularly bitter foe of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, the president's brother.

The finding was based in part on evidence that tied both Oswald and Jack Ruby, the Texas nightclub owner who gunned down Oswald two days after the Kennedy assassination, to organized crime.

Oswald was the nephew of a New Orleans bookmaker associated with Marcello's crime network and was close to another man connected to the Marcello organization, David Ferrie. Ruby had been involved with the Mafia since his childhood in Chicago and had been linked to Marcello and another underworld leader, Santo Trafficante of Tampa, Fla.

Marcello, who is still alive and has denied involvement in the assassination, had a long-running feud with the Justice Department and with Robert Kennedy, who had vowed to crush the U.S. Mafia and had singled out Marcello.

By eliminating President Kennedy, the theory goes, the Mafia could remove his brother, its real nemesis, from power at the Justice Department.



Lee Harvey Oswald

And Ruby was ordered to silence Oswald, according to the theory, because of concerns that Oswald was unstable and might disclose the conspiracy.

That Oswald was at least a key figure in the assassination is beyond dispute for most scholars.

Ballistic tests showed cartridge cases found after the assassination on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald worked and where the president's motorcade passed just a moment before he was shot, had been fired by the rifle that Oswald had purchased from a Chicago weapons company under an alias.

Grassy knoll gunman

Many scholars, however, say the Warren Commission went too far when it argued Oswald's rifle was responsible for all the shots fired into Dealey Plaza.

A number of conspiracy theorists say evidence of a second gunman can be found in a film of the assassination.

Analysis of the film indicated it would have been impossible for Kennedy and Gov. John B. Connally of Texas, who was traveling in the president's limousine and was wounded in the shooting, to have been hit by separate bullets fired from the book depository; Oswald could not have fired the rifle fast enough.

Connally agrees. He has said repeatedly he was hit by a separate bullet — a conclusion that, if true,

Coming Monday

- The Hulkster and his wrestling menagerie come to town. *Tempo*
- Cincinnati's corporate art collections. *Business Monday*
- Complete coverage of Bengals-Cowboys game.

would indicate Oswald probably received assistance from another gunman.

G. Robert Blakey, a law professor at the University of Notre Dame who was chief counsel to the House assassinations panel, said that while he accepted the Warren Commission's single-bullet theory, he still leaned toward believing a second gunman was at the scene, on the grassy knoll area ahead and to the right of Kennedy's motorcade. The book depository was also on the right, but behind the motorcade.

But as Blakey acknowledged, proving there were two gunmen would only raise another question that will probably never be answered conclusively. Even if there were proof of shots from the two locations, he said, "we couldn't confirm who the two shooters were."